



BY WADE HORN

# CLOSING The



When President George W. Bush proposed new programs to strengthen marriage, few questioned the goal but many questioned how it could be achieved. Isabel V. Sawhill, president of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, told the *New York Times*, "Marriage is a good thing, and it would help kids a lot if more were born to married parents, but I'm not sure we know how to do it."

The current debate over "how to do it" has emerged because the old debate over the value of marriage that began in the academies in the mid-1960s (and largely remained there) has ended. Notwithstanding that once-noisy argument, most Americans continued to believe that marriage is good for children, adults, and society. New studies back up what simple common sense has long maintained: On average, children raised by their own parents in healthy and stable married families enjoy better physical and mental health and are less likely to be poor. They're more successful in school, have lower dropout rates, and fewer teenage pregnan-

Not every person can or should marry. And not every child raised outside of marriage is damaged as a result. But communities where good marriages are common have better outcomes for children, women, and men than do communities suffering from high rates of divorce, unmarried child-bearing, and high-conflict or violent marriages" (*Why Marriage Matters: 21 Conclusions from the Social Sciences*).

But if marriage is a social good, can we be satisfied with a situation in which so many children and communities are deprived of its benefits? Once we acknowledge the importance of a stable, healthy marriage, the next question is what role can and should government play in helping couples best achieve it, especially those couples most at risk?

In his marriage education initiative, President Bush proposes to help couples build healthy, lasting marriages—if they want help. The mission of the Administration for Children and Families is to support activities that help those couples who choose to marry develop the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage.

Critics claim that, however well-intentioned the presi-

# MARRIAGE GAP

cies. They abuse drugs less and have fewer encounters with the criminal law.

Adults, too, benefit from healthy and stable marriages. They tend to live longer, healthier lives and are more affluent. Married mothers suffer from considerably lower rates of depression than their single counterparts. Like a good education, a good marriage is a real asset. Married men earn between 10 and 40 percent more than similar single men, and married couples accumulate substantially more wealth. By the time they're ready to retire, married couples have, on average, assets worth two and a half times as much as their single counterparts. (The figure for married couples is \$410,000, compared with \$167,000 for those who never married and \$154,000 for divorced individuals, according to Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher in their book, *The Case for Marriage*.) Family structure also has an effect on family process. It's not surprising that children are more likely to enjoy warm, enduring relationships with their parents when their parents themselves sustain warm, enduring relationships with each other. Unmarried couples living together don't reap the same benefits, either for themselves, for their children, or for society.

Twelve leading family scholars recently concluded from evidence gathered by social scientists that "marriage is more than a private emotional relationship. It's also a social good.

dent's proposals, we simply don't know enough about how to educate men and women for marriage to offer such programs. It's true that more research is needed. But while we don't know as much as we'd like to, we do know enough, based on sound empirical evidence, to state that marriage programs *do* work. They can help couples find greater satisfaction in their marriages, reduce conflict, and presumably decrease the likelihood of divorce. A 1999 comprehensive scholarly review of couples' therapy concluded on a strongly affirmative note: "The results of dozens of these [studies]...indicate unequivocally that couples' therapy increases satisfaction [in marriage]." Another study of premarital and marital enrichment programs found that they improved marital satisfaction for about two-thirds of those who participated.

Other studies have found evidence that such marriage programs may be *especially* effective for troubled couples. For example, a 1999 study found that two years after a marriage-centered treatment program for 75 male alcoholics and their wives, reports of spousal (husband to wife) violence dropped from 48 percent to 16 percent. A 2000 study of 88 male alcoholics and their wives who participated in similar behavior-

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focused alcohol treatment programs showed a substantial reduction in verbal aggression two years after the program.

Still, it's important to recognize that education for marriage is not therapy. It doesn't require highly trained and licensed professionals. In fact, preliminary results from an

ongoing clinical study of one marriage preparation program indicate that clergy and other lay educators are at least as effective as trained therapists (and considerably less expensive). Rather than following the psychotherapeutic model, marriage education takes a civil society model for tackling social problems by encouraging faith-based and other community groups to develop hands-on ways to help their members, friends, and neighbors.

Research on marriage education suffers from some of the same limitations as research on marital counseling. With a few important exceptions, the time frame of the studies is relatively short, so they don't measure the long-term effects of the programs. Concerns about the self-selection effect and other design issues call attention to the need for more and better research. Several large ongoing clinical trials of marriage interventions, including a skills-based program for new parents, conducted by Dr. Pamela L. Jordan of the University of Washington for the National Institutes of Health, will soon shed new light on these and other important questions.

We know enough today to know that we need to know more, but we already know more than enough to get started. Programs have been used in a wide variety of contexts,

and dozens of reports testify to their effectiveness. Based on the knowledge we have, we're well-prepared to launch demonstration projects informed by sound empirical research and aimed at helping at-risk couples develop healthy marriages.

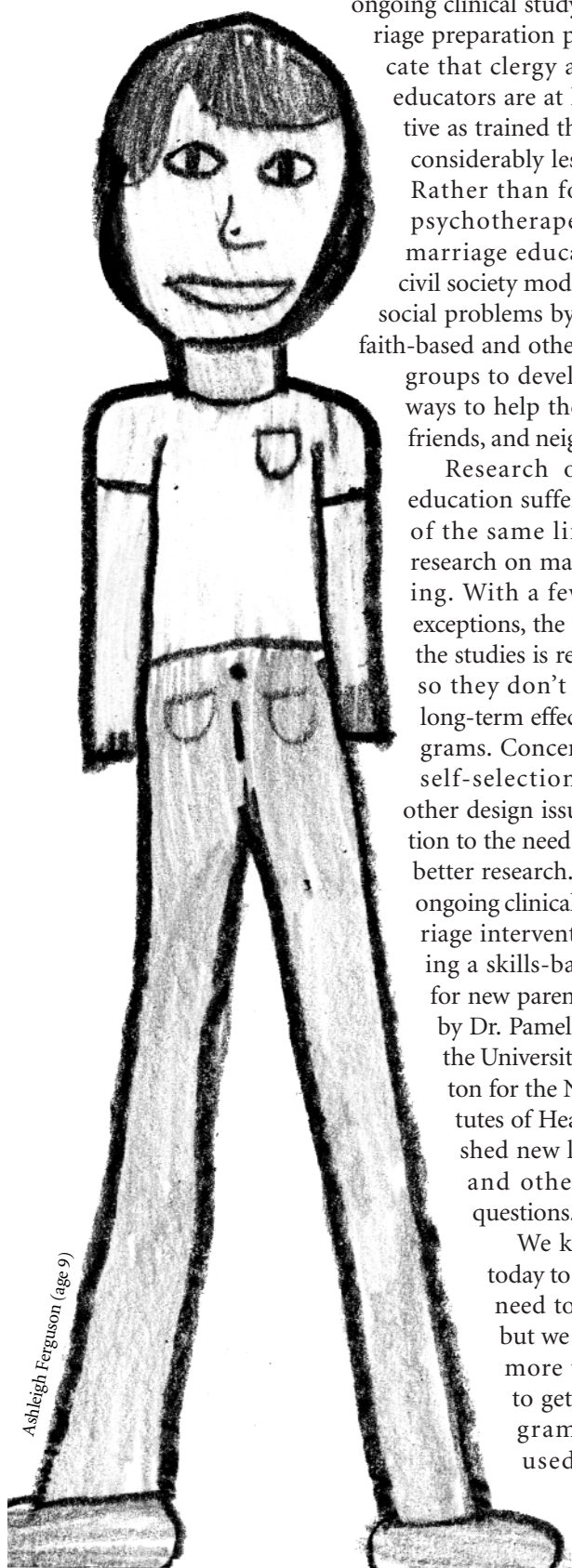
**T**he **Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program** (PREP) is one of several such programs whose long-term positive results are supported by empirical evidence. Currently available in both secular and Christian versions, PREP offers a twelve-hour sequence of mini-lectures and discussions on topics that include communication, conflict management, forgiveness, religious beliefs and practices,

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expectations, fun, and friendship. PREP emphasizes strategies for enhancing and maintaining commitment. Eighty-five percent of couples who go through PREP report that they're highly satisfied with the program. Seventy-five percent of men and 78 percent of women in one study ranked training in communication skills as its most helpful component.

Evaluating the results of premarital preparation is difficult, because attendance is voluntary and couples may drop out before evaluations are complete. However, long-term studies of couples in the PREP program report an improvement in the quality of the marriage and a reduction in divorce in the first three to five years after marriage. Three years after intervention, for example, PREP couples expressed more satisfaction with their marriages, were communicating more effectively, and reported fewer conflicts than did similar couples who didn't go through the program. Also, fewer instances of physical violence were reported in three- to five-year follow-ups.

Predictably, gains in marital satisfaction translate into lower divorce rates. In one recent study, 16 percent of the non-program couples had divorced by the time of the five-year follow-up, compared with only 3 percent of the PREP couples. In another sample, PREP couples were only about half as likely to have divorced at the five-year mark (8 percent of PREP couples versus 19 percent of the others). A large-scale research project supported by the National Institute of Mental Health is under way at the University of Denver, designed to test the long-term effectiveness of PREP when given by lay leaders or clergy in communities of faith.



A substantial program evaluation is ongoing in the U.S. Army as well.

Published empirical evidence also supports the effectiveness of the **Relationship Enhancement (RE)** program. In a two-day weekend, RE teaches couples nine marital skills that emphasize communicating effectively, responding empathetically, and resolving conflicts. "Numerous studies have evaluated the impact of RE enrichment programs for couples," a recent review of the literature states. "These studies have typically found couples make significant gains in the areas of communication, self-disclosure, empathy, and relationship adjustment."

Research comparing RE with **Couples Communication** and **Engaged Encounter** programs found that RE had the strongest effect of those tested. And it also appears to reduce rates of domestic violence. One study of 90 violent husbands—all of whom were first offenders arrested for spousal abuse—found that *none* of the men randomly assigned to RE was arrested again for the same offense in the year following treatment, compared with 20 percent of the untreated group.

Three other programs with support in the literature are **Couples Communication (CC)**, **Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS)**, and **Transitions to**

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**Parenthood.** The CC format typically consists of four two-to three-hour sessions with small groups of married couples. A review of the literature on CC concluded that this intervention had a positive effect on relationship quality and that the positive impact is maintained in follow-ups one to three months later. A more recent meta-analysis of 16 studies on CC programs found moderate gains in relationship satisfaction and communication quality.

PAIRS is a psycho-educational course designed to enhance intimacy. The hallmark 120-hour skills-training program lasts four to five months. (Shorter programs are also available.) A study of 137 spouses who completed the PAIRS course found 76 percent of them reported significant gains in intimacy over the six- to eight-month follow-up period. Both husbands and wives were more satisfied with their marriages overall than before taking the course.

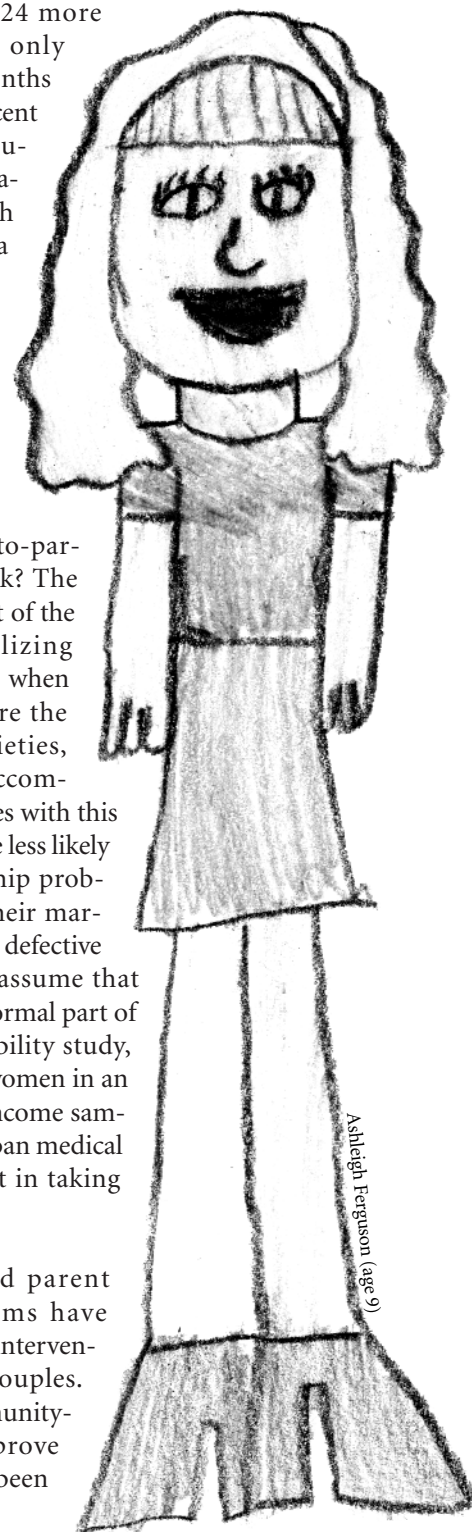
Transitions to Parenthood is a particularly promising approach targeting new parents. Because 30 to 60 percent of spouses report that their marriages are less satisfying after

the birth of their first child, there's a need, as University of California–Berkeley psychologists Philip and Carolyn Cowan point out, for marriage and relationship intervention programs for expectant and new parents.

**Becoming a Family**, an early prototype of a parent support group, appears to be a powerful force in preventing divorce and increasing marital satisfaction. In a set of 72 couples expecting their first child, the Cowans randomly assigned 24 couples to a Becoming a Family intervention, 24 others were given both a pre- and post-baby assessment, and 24 more couples were assessed only post-baby. Eighteen months following birth, 12.5 percent of the non-program couples had divorced or separated, compared with none in the Becoming a Family group. Three-and-a-half years later, 16 percent of the non-program couples had separated or divorced, compared with just 4 percent of the Becoming a Family couples.

How do transition-to-parenthood programs work? The Cowans suggest that part of the answer is the "normalizing process" that takes place when couples in a group share the frustrations, joys, anxieties, and life changes that accompany a first birth. Couples with this kind of social support are less likely to define new relationship problems as evidence that their marriages are fundamentally defective and are more likely to assume that such experiences are a normal part of family life. In one feasibility study, 72 percent of pregnant women in an ethnically diverse, low-income sample recruited from an urban medical clinic expressed interest in taking part in such a program.

**T**hese marriage and parent education programs have concentrated mostly on interventions with individual couples. Other innovative, community-based strategies to improve marriages have not yet been





rigorously evaluated and published in peer-reviewed journals, but preliminary evidence allows us to be cautiously hopeful that such civil-society and faith-based approaches may help strengthen marriages and reduce the number of children born to single mothers.

**Marriage Savers**, a nonprofit organization that aims to help local congregations support members of their own communities, has been a prominent advocate and originator of Community Marriage Policy (CMP). Under CMP, local clergy formally agree not to perform marriages without first requiring substantial marriage preparation. To help rebuild troubled marriages, they also promise to establish ongoing ministries such as stepfamily groups and marriage mentoring. The goal is to heighten community awareness of the problem of divorce, to prevent couples from “clergy shopping” to avoid premarital preparation, and to build effective marriage-saving services within communities of faith.

The Institute for Research and Evaluation is gathering data on CMP in the 160 American cities and counties where it exists, but a formal evaluation has not yet been released. Preliminary data indicate that several cities and counties that adopted CMP had notable declines in their divorce rates while others recorded no change, particularly if there was no follow-up training of mentor couples or ongoing staff.

**First Things First** (FTF), formed in 1997 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, is another example of a civic marriage initiative that partners with community and religious organizations, foundations, government, corporations, schools, and individual leaders to achieve its family-ori-

ented goals. FTF helped create a local Divorce Education and Parenting Plan pilot project, which the legislature has since expanded to include the entire state. FTF has also started an African-American Marriage Initiative in partnership with the Urban League and the Front Porch Alliance. Stephen Goldsmith, then-mayor of Indianapolis, founded the latter group in 1999 to help match churches and neighborhood groups with government resources and expertise.

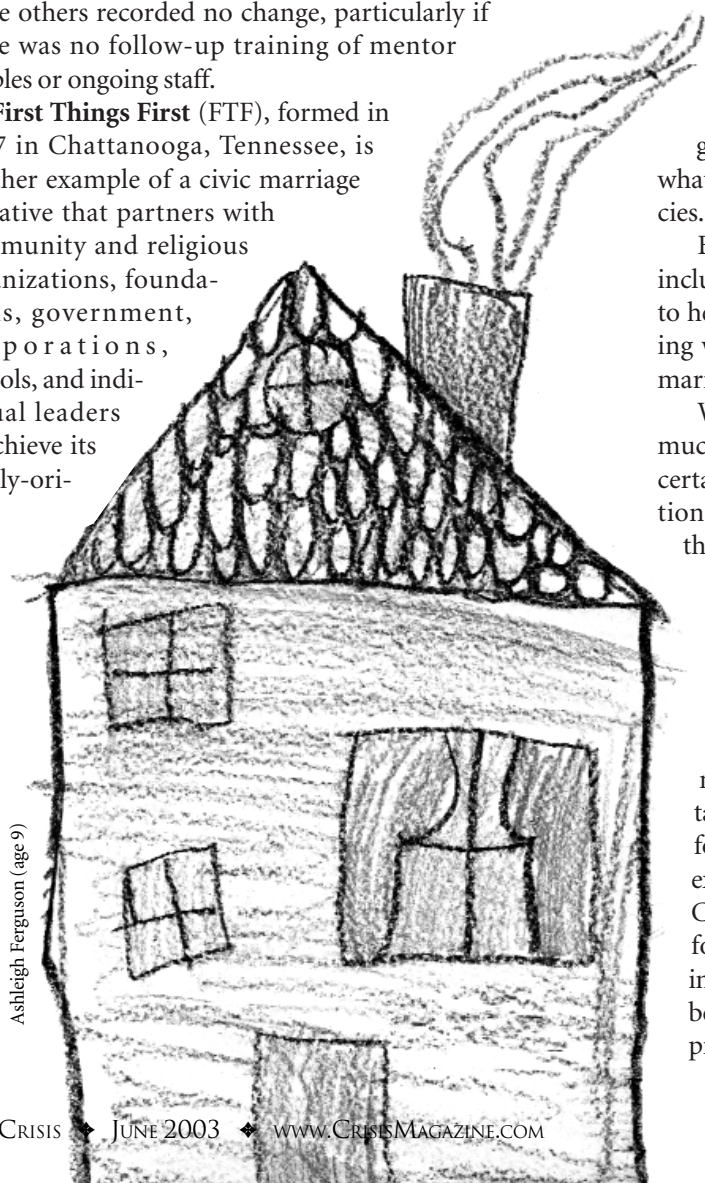
Do these civic initiatives have an impact? More rigorous research and evaluation is certainly needed, but it's encouraging to note that between 1996 and 2000 the divorce rate in Hamilton County, Tennessee, dropped almost 17 percent. Since 1997 the number of unmarried teenagers having babies has dropped 21 percent (although the number of unmarried mothers as a whole unaccountably increased by 5 percent).

Evaluating community strategies is particularly challenging, given the multiplicity of variables. We need more research before we can isolate those components of government programs and policies most likely to increase the proportion of children growing up in healthy, intact families. At the same time, it's clear we know a lot more about how to design and implement successful marriage programs than we knew about how to prevent teen pregnancy when the government first launched those programs. Eventually, rigorous evaluations of such government-funded prevention programs identified what actually worked to reduce the number of teen pregnancies.

Effective programs share several common features, including this one: They send a *clear* message. What worked to help reduce the number of teenage pregnancies was talking with teens about how and why they should avoid premarital sex.

When it comes to marriage education, we start from a much higher base of knowledge about what works, but we certainly envision a similar process: launching demonstration projects based on current knowledge and evaluating these programs to find out what works best. And the message will be clear: A healthy marriage makes a big difference to both parents and children. There's every reason to believe that discussing strategies for sustaining such a marriage will have a positive impact.

And really, there's no downside to launching such projects. To date, a large body of literature shows that most young couples like and enjoy these programs. To take one example, in a 1995 national study by the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University, which examined the impact of marriage preparation on 1,235 Catholic couples, 80 percent of those surveyed in the first four years of marriage agreed that the preparation had indeed been valuable. This result is especially interesting because the participants were not self-selected; marriage preparation in the Catholic Church is mandatory.



Moreover, many currently cohabiting but unmarried parents show a strong interest in establishing healthy marriages. According to a Fragile Families and Child Well-Being study, half of all unmarried urban mothers are living with the baby's father at the time of birth. Another one-third are romantically involved with their baby's father but not living with him. Two-thirds of unmarried new mothers agree that it's better for children if their parents are married. Seventy-three percent of them say there's at least a 50-50 chance they'll marry their baby's father; one-third indicate they almost certainly will.

Nor are all fathers of children born out of wedlock such unlikely marriage prospects as stereotypes suggest: 66 percent of urban unwed fathers have at least a high school diploma; 59 percent have household incomes above the poverty line; just 10 percent have a drug or alcohol problem.

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Certainly many new unwed parents, the majority of whom fall at the low end of the income scale, are potential candidates for marriage programs. In a representative statewide survey, 72 percent of Oklahoma adults who received welfare, food stamps, or Medicaid said they would consider using marriage education services, compared with 64 percent of adults who never received such aid. Eighty-eight percent of aid recipients agreed that a statewide initiative to promote marriage and reduce divorce was a good idea, compared with 84 percent of Oklahoma adults who never received government aid.

We don't know as much as we'd like about how to help at-risk couples create healthy marriages, but that must not stop us from taking action. The need is there, and it's time to close the marriage gap between rich and poor. People who care about the future of this society—about social equality, about fighting poverty, about the welfare of our children—cannot sit idly by as the marriage gap grows wider. We have enough solid empirical evidence to make a preemptive strike and begin launching marriage demonstration programs *right now*.

The poor want and deserve good, healthy marriages as much as the wealthy. A truly just society cannot let the powerful social and economic advantages of a good marriage become just another middle-class entitlement. ♦

## BALLAD OF THE HANGED

Mortal brothers who after us live on  
Be not hardened when our fate is known,  
But pity us our ills when we are gone,  
And likewise God will pity you your own.  
You see us hanging, nameless and unknown,  
The flesh that we so recently did sate,  
Mouldering now, devoured and decayed,  
And we, the bones, are bleaching in the sun.  
Let nobody despise our wretched state;  
But pray that God absolve us, everyone.

And if we call you brothers, then forbear  
To scorn us, even though you see us dead  
Through justice. All the same you are aware  
That not all men possess a level head.  
Have mercy on us now our souls are fled,  
And that we may be pardoned for our shame,  
And gain salvation from eternal flame,  
Commend us to the blessed Virgin's son.  
Now we are dead, let no one speak our blame;  
But pray that God absolve us, everyone.

We have been washed and cleansed by rainy skies,  
And burnt and blackened by the sunlight's glare;  
Magpies and crows have fed upon our eyes  
And from our beards and brows plucked out our hair.  
Never in repose, now here, now there,  
Swaying always as the winds decree,  
Our bodies hang for all the world to see,  
For birds and beasts to peck and prey upon.  
Then be not one of our society;  
But pray that God absolve us, everyone.

Prince Jesus, you who reign in majesty,  
Vouchsafe to guard us from the enemy  
That his infernal kingdom we may shun.  
Men, here there is no trace of mockery;  
But pray that God absolve us, everyone.

—François Villon  
Translation by Marion Shore